DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 420 088 CS 509 856

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TITLE Communicating Scholarly Research via the Poster Session: The Experience at a National Convention.
PUB DATE 1996-11-24
NOTE 18p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the Speech Communication Association (82nd, San Diego, CA, November 23-26, 1996).
PUB TYPE Reports - Evaluative (142) -- Speeches/Meeting Papers (150)
EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Attitude Measures; *Communication Research; Higher Education; Occupational Surveys; *Professional Development; *Scholarship; *Speech Communication
IDENTIFIERS Faculty Attitudes; *Poster Sessions; Presentation Mode; *Professional Meetings; Scholarly Communication

ABSTRACT

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ED 420 088

Communicating scholarly research via the poster session

The experience at a national convention

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CS509856

[This research was presented at the
1996 Annual Convention of the
Speech Communication Association;
program sponsored by the Commission on Experiential Learning
November 24, 1996
San Diego, CA]

Communicating scholarly research via the poster session:

The experience at a national convention

Abstract

As academic associations and their annual conventions have grown in size, the poster session has become a common format for presentation of scholarly work. Little is known, however, about how communication educators perceive poster sessions and their value to career advancement. Poster sessions have also been criticized as poorly structured and "second-class citizens" to paper panels. This survey of 129 poster session presenters (49% response rate) from the 1995 Speech Communication Association convention examines motivations for participation and satisfaction with the poster session format. Respondents offered ideas to improve the structure and purpose of the poster session, yielding practical advice for both planners and presenters.

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The poster session as a format for presentation of scholarly research is a relatively new experience for many scholarly groups, including the Speech Communication Association (SCA, now National Communication Association), which have traditionally relied on individual presentations and panels.[1] As academic conventions have grown in size and scope, the poster session has emerged as a format that makes it possible for research papers to be accepted and presented that otherwise would be cut from increasingly crowded and competitive convention schedules. Ostensibly, a second role of the poster session is to allow greater person-to-person interaction than traditional sessions.

The poster session typically consists of a visual display affixed to a board. In the same room, a number of presenters stand beside their displays and discuss their research with visitors.

While critics argue that this poster format trivializes and "ghettoizes" legitimate research, the interactive nature of poster sessions appears to be an advantage supported by the literature on adult learning, which maintains that the process of collaboration and dialogue is central to adult learning (Willets, Boyce & Franklin, 1995).

Poster sessions have been utilized by a diverse array of scholarly groups. Examples of professional associations utilizing poster sessions, some for decades, include the American Psychological Association, American Society for Microbiology, American Society of Human Genetics, American Public Health Association, and the Society for Neuroscience. In the communication field, poster sessions are used by SCA, the International Communication Association (ICA), the Association for Education in Journalism and Mass Communication, and regional associations, such as the Eastern Communication Association.

Poster sessions were introduced at the 1993 and 1994 SCA conventions on a limited and experimental basis (Chesebro, 1996). However, for its 1995 Convention in San Antonio, SCA requested that 20 percent of all divisions, commissions and interest groups' allotted sessions be specifically scheduled as poster sessions. This directive received considerable unfavorable reaction from SCA members, and in response SCA reduced the amount to ten percent of all sessions for the 1996 conference. At the 1995 convention, 105 proposed panel sessions were restructured into poster sessions, and 529 papers were assigned to poster session presentations (Chesebro, 1996). Some sessions were held in large meeting halls and included 50 or more paper authors.

According to SCA President James Chesebro, writing in the association's *Spectra* newsletter about the 1995 convention schedule, programs were more likely to be assigned to poster sessions if they made no provision for a respondent, if they did not indicate any interaction

between panelists, and if topics were unrelated to papers on a panel program (Chesebro, 1996, p. 3).

Quantitative research about effective and appropriate application of the poster session format is rare in the research literature. Several "how to" writings have been published offering guidance about the construction and display of posters ("A poster worth," 1993; Matera & Gucciardo, 1992). In the scant research literature about the poster session format at conventions, Carter, Friberg, Scott, Nilsson, Swahn & Boulogner (1996) reported an experiment designed to improve the quality of posters. Two months prior to the 1994 annual convention of the Swedish Medical Association, a random sample of poster presenters was mailed a brochure describing 24 ways to improve poster presentations. Brochure recipients made use of more suggestions than nonrecipients, and their posters were judged to have higher presentation quality.

Welch and Waehler (1996) asked 271 attendees at the 1993 American Psychological Association convention to evaluate poster sessions on three dimensions: visual display and organization, demeanor of presenter, and content. Visual display was rated as the most important dimension. Large type, concise presentation of material, and use of graphs and charts were preferred.

This research sought the perspective of poster session presenters. Because researchers are concerned about communicating their scholarly efforts at conventions, a need exists to assess the appropriateness, value, and effectiveness of the poster session format from the perspective of the presenters themselves. The questions posed by this research are intended to serve both diagnostic and prescriptive purposes. The following research themes are explored: the primary motivations of those who presented their research in poster sessions; the degree of satisfaction with various

aspects of the poster session experience, and suggestions to improve the poster session presentation experience.

Method

Participants

The respondent pool consisted of the 1995 SCA San Antonio Convention poster session participants. They were of interest to the researchers because of the new directive for a twenty percent allotment of research to the poster session format. A systematic sampling procedure was employed by which every other presenter's name was chosen for inclusion out of the 529 poster session presenters listed in the 1995 program schedule. This procedure yielded an initial pool of approximately half of all presenters (n=264). Addresses for these participants were obtained from the SCA directory. Names not listed in the directory were discarded from the sample, and the next name was chosen from the program as a replacement, so that the size of the sample remained at 264.

Survey Instrument

A 21-item survey instrument was developed by the authors. Questions in the survey included (1) how the respondent became a poster session participant (requested or was assigned to poster session), (2) primary motivation for participating, (3) perceived value of poster sessions for networking, job hunting, advancement and tenure, and sharing and refining research, (4) satisfaction with instructions, (5) perceptions of poster session's appropriateness as a presentational format, (6) comparisons with traditional sessions in terms of satisfaction and prestige, and (7) suggestions for improvements. Respondents also were asked to indicate academic rank, gender, and number of previous poster sessions presentations. One open-ended

question was included to allow respondents to make suggestions regarding poster sessions. An introductory paragraph noted that the survey was not being conducted at the behest of SCA.

Where an e-mail address was available for the respondent, surveys were sent by e-mail. Where such an address was not available in the SCA directory or was non-functioning, surveys were sent by regular mail. Respondents were invited to respond by e-mail, fax or regular mail.

Results

Response rate

The authors received 129 responses to the survey (49% response rate). Seventy surveys (54%) were returned to the authors via regular mail, 40 (31%) via electronic mail. Eighteen surveys (13.9%) that were e-mailed to the respondents were printed out and returned to the authors via regular mail. One e-mailed survey was returned via fax.

Demographics of respondents

Gender was balanced (52.8% female, with four respondents not indicating gender). Academic rank was well distributed, with the largest category being assistant professors (29.4%), followed by associate professors (20.6%), full professors (19%), students (15.9%) and instructors (14.3%). One high school teacher also responded to the survey.

Previous participation in poster sessions

More than half of respondents (58.9%, n=76) indicated that the 1995 SCA convention was their first experience as a poster session presenter. Of the remaining respondents, 21.8% (n=28) had presented in one previous poster session, 14.5% (n=19) in two previous poster sessions. Nearly 5% of respondents (n=6) were quite experienced at poster sessions, reporting previous participation in three or more.

Method of selection

The majority of respondents (87.7%, n=107) submitted their presentation for a traditional panel presentation (or did not specify the format they desired) and were assigned to a poster session. Only 12.3% of respondents (n=15) said they submitted their proposal specifically as a poster session presentation.

Primary motivators

Respondents were asked to choose from a list of five options (or explain in their own words) their primary motivation for participating in a poster session. The most frequently chosen reason was the desire to share research with others (53% of responses, n=61). Cross-tabulations of motivations by academic rank revealed that the desire to share research was the primary motivation for participation across all academic ranks. Professional advancement and tenure was the motivation for 20% of respondents (n=23). The third most frequently cited motivator was the explanation "I had no choice," mentioned by 16 respondents (13.9%), who apparently felt they were forced to do a poster session or nothing at all. Slightly more than 5% of respondents (n=6) selected networking and the opportunity to refine their research as the primary motive. No one selected the listed option of "job hunting" as their primary motivation.

Perceived value of poster session

Respondents were asked to rank the value of their poster session in several areas on a five-point scale ranging from "not at all valuable" (1) to "very valuable" (5). Their responses reveal that poster sessions are perceived as being most valuable for sharing research (M=3.48) and job hunting (M=3.11). Poster sessions were seen as less valuable for advancement and tenure

(M=2.92) and networking (M=2.75). Poster sessions were rated the least valuable for refining research (M=2.60).

Perception of instructions to presenters.

Responses on a five-point scale, with 1="strongly disagree" and 5="strongly agree," indicate need for improvement in the quality of instructions provided to presenters. Respondents rated the following items: "I received helpful instructions from the session organizer(s) about the form in which I had to present my poster" (M= 3.44); "I received helpful instructions from the session organizer(s) about the logistics of setting up at the conference" (M = 3.36).

Level of interaction.

Respondents reported a range of interaction, from two respondents who reported that not a single person engaged them in conversation about their display, to an estimate of 70 persons. The median number was 10.

Satisfaction with poster session format.

Respondents were evenly split about the suitability of the poster session format for presentation of their research. On the item "I was able to adequately present my research in poster format," M=3.06, where 1="strongly disagree" and 5="strongly agree." Similarly, most respondents favored traditional presentations over poster sessions. On the item "If given the option, I would choose to do a poster session rather than a traditional presentation," more than 35% of respondents strongly disagreed with this statement, while 8.6% strongly agreed with it (M=2.35). However, respondents appeared to be slightly more likely to attend future poster sessions as a result of their own experiences (M=3.39).

When asked to rate their overall satisfaction with poster sessions, respondents were lukewarm (M=3.13). Cross-tabulation of overall satisfaction by academic rank revealed that

student presenters were most satisfied with their poster session experience, with 60% reporting being satisfied. Fifty-five percent of instructors were satisfied with their experience, compared to 50% of full professors and associate professors and 38% of assistant professors.

Of those who submitted their program as a traditional presentation but were assigned to a poster session, 47% reported satisfaction with their experience compared to 37% who were dissatisfied and 15% who responded neutrally. Of the 13 respondents who submitted programs specifically as poster sessions, 8 reported satisfaction with their experience. Women were slightly more likely to be satisfied with their poster session experience (51.5%) than men (45%).

Perceptions of value/prestige of sessions.

On average, respondents agreed with the statement "The poster session is less prestigious than traditional presentations" (M=3.39). Interestingly, more than one-third of respondents (n=46) indicated that they did not know whether poster sessions are recognized by their department's promotion and tenure committee. The mean response from those who did know (3.41) indicates that on average, committees do recognize the poster session. Less than 5% of respondents (n=6) strongly disagreed with this statement. Similarly, 39% of respondents also did not know whether traditional sessions are treated as superior to poster sessions by their department's promotion and tenure committee. Those who did know tended to agree that traditional sessions are treated as superior by promotion and tenure committees (M=3.43).

Open-ended responses.

A final open-ended question asked respondents "Do you have suggestions for changes in the way poster sessions are organized and administered?" Suggestions were categorized into seven areas, with frequencies as follows: (1) Instructions to presenters, (n=25), (2) The quality of interaction (n=20), (3) Criteria for selection as a poster session (n=20), (4)

Administration/organization of sessions (*n*=12); (5) Scheduling of sessions (*n* = 11); (6) Room set-up (*n*=8); (7) Promotion of sessions (*n*=8); (8) Abolish sessions entirely (*n*=7).

While the item asked for suggestions, some respondents offered only comments (18 positive, 6 negative) with no suggestions for change. Of the eighteen respondents who offered only positive comments, several expressed surprise that their poster session was indeed a good experience. Others said they enjoyed the one-on-one interaction, appreciated the disguising of poster sessions in the program, so that tenure and promotion committees couldn't discount them, and enjoyed the opportunity to see a range of research in a short period of time. One respondent urged presenters not to "get hung up on the mode of presentation."

Suggestions for improvements. The largest category of suggestions centered on providing more explicit and accurate instructions, to be sent further in advance. Guidelines aimed at improving the quality of visuals were a primary concern. Respondents complained about presenters who simply posted pages of their paper, and those who posted visuals but lacked written papers. "There needs to be some kind of quality control," noted one respondent. "It's humiliating to conduct a significant research project, carefully develop a poster session, and have it lumped together with posters that look like they were developed by freshman speech students."

Comments regarding the quality of interaction generally reported problems in terms of both quantity and quality of discussion. "So few people came by that it was almost a waste of time," wrote one respondent. "Very few people asked questions -- most dashed through and grabbed papers," wrote another. Respondents suggested finding ways to build traffic and develop a mechanism for formal, on-site feedback by a panel of experts. "Casual observers tend to be polite and not offer constructive criticism," wrote one respondent.

The next largest category of suggestions focused on clarifying the selection criteria used to determine which proposals are assigned to poster sessions. Respondents disliked having the choice of format made for them, and perceived that selection was based on a determination of lesser quality. Respondents suggested that only topics which lend themselves to visual display should be assigned to poster sessions. In addition to clarifying guidelines for selection, one respondent suggested that authors be given the opportunity to withdraw if their paper is selected for a poster session.

Regarding administration and organization, five respondents suggested that poster sessions be organized by topic, division or methodology to avoid a "hodgepodge" atmosphere. Other suggestions for administration included providing censure or punishment for no-shows; giving presenters five minutes each to explain their work to a group audience before dismissing the audience to speak to presenters individually (a practice used by ICA); providing a 15-minute "closed session" so that presenters can see each other's work; and creating separate sessions for "work in progress" or research that is deemed inadequate for presentation. Explained one respondent, "When people talk with authors whose work is not rigorous it works against efforts to persuade scholars that poster sessions are not 'second-class citizens.'"

Respondents suggested scheduling poster sessions so they do not compete with panels, avoiding scheduling them adjacent to lunch or prior to 9:30 a.m, or combining them with a cocktail hour. "By its nature, a poster requires extra cost and effort, so participants should be given every chance of having results widely viewed," wrote one respondent.

Eight respondents suggested improvements for room set-up. These included reducing the number of presenters in each session; getting confirmations as to whether presenters plan to

attend so that half-empty halls can be avoided; making sure every aisle is two-sided, with presenters facing each other, so that every aisle is deemed worthy of attention.

Suggestions for improving promotion of poster sessions included providing awards for top posters and visually designating these in the hall; informing conferees that they can pick up poster session papers at the beginning of the convention; involving well-known, highly published researchers in poster sessions; and encouraging more graduate student participation.

Comments without suggestions. Seven respondents recommended abolishing poster sessions altogether. One respondent wrote, "I believe that poster sessions create a circus-like atmosphere in which featured papers are popularized for mass consumption." Another noted that the poster session was "double the work -- I had to write a paper and do a poster." Other critical comments reflected disappointment at being placed in a poster session and noted that the visuals were difficult to transport.

Discussion

Clearly, all presentation formats have pros and cons, and there are positive and negative aspects to both poster sessions and traditional panel sessions. However, this research suggests that the advantages of poster sessions -- and in particular the potential for substantive dialogue and interaction -- are not being fully realized.

To SCA's credit, President James Chesebro recommended several improvements in the organization's March 1996 newsletter, Spectra. These included avoiding scheduling poster sessions opposite traditional presentations and making poster session papers available in advance through the paper distribution center -- suggestions also mentioned by respondents.

All parties involved in poster sessions -- the organizers, presenters and attendees -- can take steps to improve the quality of the experience. The organizers, including sponsoring

divisions, can ensure that criteria for assignment to poster sessions are clear and unambiguous. They can provide explicit and timely instructions. Organizers can manipulate the size, scheduling and physical set-up of poster sessions to facilitate interaction. Sponsoring divisions can reward outstanding visual displays, and weed out those that don't conform to guidelines or standards of academic rigor. And the association can employ creative promotions to attract the general membership to poster sessions and distinguish them from paper collection sites. For their part, presenters can expend more effort to create visually attractive displays which capture the essence of their research, and do their part to initiate dialogue and actively solicit honest feedback.

Conferees can come to poster sessions prepared to engage in intellectual discussion and offer constructive advice. Admittedly, there are few controls over the actions of attendees, so the bulk of the responsibility must be shouldered by poster session organizers and the presenters.

A noteworthy finding of this study is that those holding lowest-ranking positions -- students and instructors -- were most satisfied with their poster session experience, while assistant professors, who typically face tenure decisions, were least satisfied. Faculty at this rank ostensibly have the greatest stake in successful research presentations, and may be most disappointed at their assignment to poster sessions rather than panels, which they believe will be perceived as more prestigious.

The fact that previous presenters were more satisfied than first-timers suggests that experience may quell some of the resistance to poster sessions. The relative newness of poster sessions is likely also a factor in the large proportion of respondents who were unsure of how posters sessions were perceived by promotion and tenure committees. This points to the need for communication between academic associations and member institutions – and educators and their departments.

In summary, the findings of this survey suggest that communication via the poster session is useful, but needs refinement. Organizers, presenters, and audience members all share responsibility for effective use of poster sessions as communication vehicles for scholarly research. In a best-case scenario, the poster session is a lively discussion between colleagues which may lead to discoveries of shared interest and new lines of inquiry. In a worst-case scenario, the poster session is a half-empty room with presenters waiting for anyone to stop and show some interest. Poster session defenders suggest perhaps this is better than not presenting at all. These survey results from poster session presenters at a national convention offer valuable perspectives that can help all professional associations and prospective presenters to better utilize the poster session format as a communication vehicle, and foster a richer experience for all involved.

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[1] This research was prompted by a discussion during a meeting of the Experiential Learning Commission of NCA. The authors wish to emphasize that the inception of this research effort was in no way a response to or a reflection of the authors' previous experience with poster sessions at NCA.